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Debate Paper 1

Does Comedy News Enhance Political and Environmental Literacy?

March 17, 2012

Word Count: 1988

Traditionally, news has been conveyed through the media, such as newspapers, radio stations, television channels, and the internet, to the public in a primarily informational and declarative format. Comedy news breaks from this standard by adding comedy to everyday news stories, which makes it significantly more entertaining and engaging. Often, comedy news uses satire to highlight stupidities in the news that would likely have gone unnoticed otherwise. “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” and “The Colbert Report” are examples of comedy news shows. In these shows, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert tell stories of current events and then point out unexpected ways in which parts of the news stories are absurd. For example, Fox News is often criticized for being hypocritical in what they say. At one point Fox News said that subsidies for poor people in the United States were too large, even though they previously said that subsidies for large corporations, which are numerically greater than those for poor people, are too small. Another example of comedy news is “The Yes Men”, which is a pair of men who use controversial tactics, such as posing as representatives of a company, to expose the truth in the government and corporations. They convey their stories and messages in the form of movies such as “The Yes Men” and “The Yes Men Fix the World.” A third example of comedy news is “The Onion”, which conveys messages through satirical and often false articles. While these forms of comedy news are entertaining, this debate raises the question of how comedy news affects the political and environmental literacy of the public. This is an important debate because it has many stakeholders such as comedians, television broadcasters, politicians, traditional news, the public, corporations, the economy, environmentalists, and the environment itself. Comedians such as Jon Stewart depend on viewer interest in comedy news. Politicians are the target of many of the jokes and the economy and environment are strongly affected by the issues addressed in many of the jokes. In order to completely analyze this question of whether or not comedy news enhances political and environmental literacy, there are multiple sub-issues that must be addressed. For example, is comedy news unfairly biased to the left or right? Is it too

easy for comedians to take advantage of their influence by preaching their own ideas? Is comedy news effective at making viewers, listeners, and readers aware of politics and environmental problems? Are the correct or intended ideas being communicated to the audience? These are some of the questions that must be answered to make a decision in this debate.

In his article, "America Is a Joke", Chris argues that comedy news does enhance political and environmental literacy. Smith begins by explaining how recent changes in many of the aspects of life have paved the way for comedy news. For example, extreme events such as wars, global economic issues, and terrorist attacks have significantly increased tension in politics. Smith explains that this has made politicians seem like actors that are following scripts and has changed people's views of news networks such as Fox News. Further, the rise of the internet has both hurt newspapers, magazines, and traditional television news networks and helped to increase the ability of people to have their own opinions and participate in the spread of news. Altogether, Smith argues that this "change in context" has made comedy news a facilitator in increasing political and environmental literacy among the public. As an example, Smith quotes Jon Stewart: "We [comedians] felt like we're serious people doing an unserious thing, and they [politicians] are unserious people doing a very serious thing." This shows how comedy helps to spread news that something senseless has been done in politics. Another example that Smith uses is the controversy about the mosque that was to be built in New York City near ground-zero. The general public mistakenly thought that the mosque was to be built directly on ground-zero, but Stewart pointed out that it was set to be built three blocks away. Smith argues that this shows how comedy news helps eliminate misconceptions that rise in the mind of the public. Smith extends this argument when he says, "What has separated Stewart from ordinary carpers, though, is his willingness to call bullshit to the face of the bull-shitters." In other words, comedy news is its willingness to blow the whistle when no one else is willing to, which is valuable for increasing the public's awareness of these issues. Finally, Smith argues that comedy news better reaches lesser educated people. He supports this by using the example of when MSNBC used the word "Czar" as if everyone knew what it meant. Stewart responded by saying how idiotic it is for MSNBC to assume that everyone knows what a "Czar" is, which restricts that audience that can be reached. Without comedy news, Smith argues that there would be the problem of nobody standing up to say that they do not understand something. Altogether, Smith's

arguments indicate that his ideological framework is that society is constantly changing and that things too easily go unnoticed or unspoken for no apparent reason.

While Smith presents a strong argument that comedy news has positively impacted political awareness, his arguments are lacking in discussing if the views of comedians tend to be biased towards the left and if the intended messages are being effectively absorbed by the audience. First, while Smith argues that comedians are bi-partisan because they target both the right and the left, he admits that comedians tend to target the right more. Smith could have strengthened his argument by saying that the audience can interpret jokes targeted at either side in any way. The fact that some issue or topic is being brought up and the audience can decide which side they are on is more important than what side comedian is on in making the joke. Second, Smith's argument that comedians help reach lesser educated audiences in which he uses the "Czar" example, is lacking because he does not consider the fact that satire can be difficult for some people to understand. For example, watching Stewart's or Colbert's shows tend to require significantly more concentration than watching traditional news programming, which suggests that comedy news requires an audience that is able to do this, potentially limiting the audience to people of a certain level of intelligence.

In his article, "Jon Stewart and the Burden of History", Tom Junod argues that comedy news is not effective at enhancing political and environmental awareness because comedians take advantage of the influence they gain due to their popularity and apparent voice of reason by using it to do things beyond what is right. Junod uses Jon Stewart as an example of a comedian taking advantage of his power. For example, Junod explains how when a bill that gave benefits to 9/11 responders was not being passed in congress, Stewart used his influence on politicians by insisting how ridiculous it was that the bill was not being passed. After Stewart took advantage of his influence, the bill was passed and he was able to have one of his children's birthday parties at the firehouse of one of the 9/11 responders benefited by the bill that Stewart helped pass. A second example that Junod uses is Stewart's interview of Jim Cramer in 2009 after the financial collapse that was likely caused by tactics that Cramer had previously encouraged. Junod argues that Stewart went beyond standard interview procedures by essentially bully Cramer and forcing him to completely submit for Stewart and his audience's own enjoyment. Nevertheless, Stewart denies how much influence and power he has in politics and says that he is just a comedian. Junod disagrees because he says Stewart has moved beyond innocent jokes and to jokes that

seriously influence politics. Altogether, Junod says that this causes people to follow Stewart as if he is a flawless person when he is not, in reality. This disconnect makes it impossible for comedians like Stewart to truly enhance political and environmental literacy. Based on these arguments, Junod's ideological framework is the idea that no one is ideal even though the way media paints people makes them appear to be ideal. Junod sees this inconsistency of someone appearing ideal when they are not as dangerous.

While Junod presents a strong argument that news comedians tend to take advantage of their power, his arguments have many overstatements and a significant amount of faulty reasoning in supporting stories about Stewart. For example, in attempting to paint a picture of Stewart's personality, Junod says that Stewart is smart and tough because he is from Lawrence, which is between Princeton and Trenton. While this is such a small point, Junod's article would lose much of its content if all of these were removed. This suggests that he has less true supporting evidence for his arguments than it appears that he has. Further, Junod's arguments focus only on the sub-issue in this debate of comedians taking advantage of their power. Junod could have strengthened his position by elaborating further on how comedians tend to be biased toward the left and how comedian's tendencies to have cult-like followings does nothing to increase public awareness of political and environmental issues.

In their article, "Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Very Political 'Joke'", Ben Smith and Keach Hagey uses Stewart and Colbert's "Rally to Restore Sanity" as an example to analyze the potential effects that comedy news has on political awareness, particularly in voter turnout. Rather than provide arguments from one side of the debate, this article gives arguments from both sides and allows the reader to decide which side is more convincing. The first point that Smith and Hagey make is that the rally was the Saturday right before the mid-term elections on Tuesday. This could be an advantage in that it makes hundreds of thousands of people more aware of politics and therefore more likely to vote in the elections. On the other hand, Smith and Hagey point out that it could potentially distract activists from their last minute door knocking and phone calling plans. While it is unlikely that they would cancel their plans for a comedian's rally, this could significantly affect voter turnout of people that do not watch comedy news. The second point that Smith and Hagey make is that the rally could indirectly increase voter literacy and turnout. While Stewart and Colbert keep the rally relatively non-political with standard entertainment like concerts, it also brings a large group of a specific type of people together.

Organizations such as Rock the Vote can take advantage of gatherings like this to have participants sign pledges to vote in the upcoming elections. Smith and Hagey's analysis of this rally provides different perspectives and evidence that is not mentioned by the authors of the other two articles.

In my opinion, I feel that comedy news both helps and hurts political and environmental literacy and has no net positive or negative effect. Many examples, such as comedians reaching a different audience than traditional news programs and pointing things out that would otherwise be left alone, indicate that comedy news might increase political and environmental awareness in the public. On the other hand, many examples, such as the tendency of comedians to be biased toward the left and how people might not receive the intended message, show that comedy news might not help, and potentially even hurt, political and environmental literacy. In order to respond to this issue, I think concrete studies must be done to determine whether comedy news has a negative, neutral, or positive impact on political and environmental literacy. Further, I think that if comedy news is found to be effective, careful consideration must be taken to ensure that it does not create a particular political ideology in viewers, which may or may not mean that it can still contain attacks on specific political parties.

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